

1 Samuel 8: 1-21

2 Corinthians 4: 7-5:1

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Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

Among the many reasons the Bible is God's word to me is this: it is brutally honest. Yet such is the living nature of scripture that the honest truth of scripture is revealed to us only in proportion as we are honest with ourselves. If we are rigorously honest with ourselves, the Bible will be honest with us. If we are full of illusions and denial scripture will either be silent or will reflect back to us what we need it to say. It is only the individual and the community that is dedicated to seeking and hearing what the Lord has to say with complete trust and confidence who will have a chance at receiving God's truth. When this happens—which, by the way is rarely—we discover that the truth which we seek is often very different from the one we want or expect. But when we have the courage, trust and faith to be willing to hear what the word is saying, we discover in even the most difficult and disturbing teaching the presence of unconditional and nurturing love.

This reality is evident throughout scripture. It was particularly real for Samuel who discovered that when he replied to the voice of God, "Speak, for your servant is listening," that the word could be hard to hear. For when he heard that word it was to tell his spiritual father, Eli, that God had determined to destroy his family and end their priestly service because of their corruption.

Many years later, Samuel is old. His own sons do not follow in his path and are not spiritually fit to carry on the Lord's ministry. A crisis is looming. Up to this point the people of Israel have been a loose association of tribes with no central government. They have been led

by an assortment of women and men with varying skills. The one common ability was to be able to unite the tribes in a time of crisis—usually to respond to threats from neighboring tribes. But deep down, the understanding was that what really united Israel was God who delivered them from slavery in Egypt and brought them into the land of promise—Canaan.

Being unblinkingly honest, scripture tells us that entering the land was accomplished with brutal, almost genocidal bloodshed. We are not meant to approve of this mass destruction. We can sense within the story a deep unease with the cost to the native peoples who lost their lives and territory to these invaders. To the people of the time this was how the world was. A people's right to a territory was only as strong as their ability to defend it against other tribes. The idea of respecting other's boundaries and right to live peacefully among other communities would have been understood as a foolish idea.

Yet what made the Israelites different is that they experienced themselves as being held to a higher standard. Whereas the peoples living in Canaan had many gods, Israel had one God. Whereas the tribes living in the land of promise worshipped handmade idols, Israel expressly worshipped a God known only by faith. Whereas, the nations displaced by Israel practiced human sacrifice, cult prostitution—both same sex and heterosexual—Israel had forsworn all human sacrifice. Most tellingly, whereas the native tribes had kings who organized armies and enforced loyalty, Israel had no king. They relied on God to lead and protect them. Their history demonstrated that when they looked to God to guide and protect them, they prospered. When they adopted the practices of the peoples around them by worshipping idols and the other practices, they became weak and were conquered by more powerful tribes. When God raised up a leader who relied on the God's power Israel regained strength and expelled their

adversaries. What for us is a rather glib slogan to be put on our money and license plates, was for them a living reality: "In God we trust."

With this background you can begin to appreciate the crisis represented by the aging Samuel and the lack of any apparent, reliable successor. The anxiety about what would happen when Samuel died and there was no leadership. Never mind that up to this time God had been faithful in raising up a leader to meet the challenge of the day. On this occasion Israel felt exposed and vulnerable and viewed the death of Samuel with despair. They did not trust God to raise up another faithful leader. Crucially, they did not even try to seek God's guidance. Instead, in violation of God's express directions *not* to adopt the practices of the peoples around them, they demanded a king, "like the other nations." Thus God says to Samuel, "They have not rejected *you*, Samuel; they have rejected *me*. From here on in Israel would trust in military power and no longer in God. From here on in, Israel would be blessed by kings who loved God and put worshipping God first. But the brutally honest record of scripture is that most of the time the kings of Israel were petty dictators under whose rule the high vision of a people *under* God vanished and Israel became just one more nation among others vying for power and wealth and willing to do whatever it took to get it.

I could say something ironic here in comparing that time to this; however, I think you can see the parallels as well as I can. Whether we are liberal or conservative Christians, we see the damaging effects of a national life that pays lip service to God but in reality trusts power and the cultivation of self-indulgence that masquerades as freedom. The great tragedy of Christianity today is that we spend more time attacking each other for our liberal or conservative positions than uniting in humility and forbearance in lifting up Jesus Christ, God's

Son and redeemer of the world. We hold a precious treasure in extremely fragile and common vessels. Who of us feels worthy to bear the likeness of God and the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the world? Who of us can stand before God and claim we hold God's pure and undiluted truth. To use the words of Paul in First Corinthians, who of us does not look into a mirror and not receive back a distorted image?

Yet there is one place where Christians of all perspectives gather where what we hold in common transcends our differences. There is one place where we gather just as we are without one plea except that Christ's blood was shed for each one of us. There is one place where there is no Jew or Greek, male female, liberal or conservative—where we are simply God's children coming to the table that has been prepared for us. We see the bread and cup. We *behold* the body and blood of Christ. We see one another in all our diversity. We behold a community of God's beloved children. We see a room full of people; yet as we share in this sacred meal we become the body of Christ whose one desire is to bring all of his sisters and brothers home. Amen.